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Womanhood, art, irritation.

Prominent renaissance women in the cultural memory

Theses

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Late Romantic and Early Modern Hungarian Literature PhD

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Budapest, 2017.

19th century women's history has become increasingly popular recently, and woman writers, female writing and the contemporary female image and its representation in literature gains more and more focus within this area. By examining the sources of this period, it is evident that four duties were associated with women according to the contemporary ideal: maternal, matrimonial, domestic, and patriotic (which pervades all previous three roles). In the 19th century, women were considered to be in passive roles, only within the family, and they were not considered as suitable for engaging in the public sphere. At least, that is how this period's woman ideal is seen in the beginning of the 21st century. This homogeneous image is not so apparent if we observe the concept of female heroes. Such female heroes were not nearly as present in the Hungarian nation's history as their male counterparts. However, the increasing discourse about this topic resulted in a higher volume among stories and works written about women, where women acted differently from the women's ideal, as they were in situations that were outside of conventional social practices (taking on male roles or radically breaking from society's norms). However, counterexamples were just as frequent in alternative history writing. My thesis focuses on women who were judged controversially or absolutely negatively, but at the same time it strives to show a positive pattern as well.

In my dissertation, I examine the results of anthropology, social science, history and literary studies through a corpus of texts focusing on historical female figures. This corpus covers an extensive time period from the reformation until the second World War. This broad time period is explained by the origin date of works regarding female figures. Despite the broad time period, they provide interesting parallels and correlations together.

By examining the mediator role of famous historical women, the main questions are the following: what kind of correlations are shown in history, anthropology and literature regarding the reputation of female historical figures? How can writers reflect through their works on the characteristics of historical sources and folklore written between the 16th and 19th centuries? Based on the examined corpus, what kind of consequences can be drawn from famous historical women - such as Beatrice of Aragon, Isabella Jagiellon, Erzsébet Báthory and Anna Báthory - , the contemporary ideal of women and the norms associated with women? How were women's public involvement and norm violations portrayed and judged? On what kind of patterns did these female careers develop?

Due to the size limitations of my dissertation, several specific time period and female figure had to be chosen. I chose this time period since this is the most relevant one regarding my questions about the handling of historical sources and the presence of beliefs. 19th century historians believed that this is the time period where we can directly gain access - even if only partially and only in respect of a part of society - to the history of women. The reason behind this is that the first traces of female private documents and mails were connected to this time period. (*Farkas Deák, Sándor Takáts.*) While their ideology was reflected on the female image constructed by themselves, they viewed the reconstructions of these female figures critically. What is exciting in the historical works and literature is the view on documents left by women. They focus on the intimacy and honesty of the private letters, or the political opportunities and the contemporary chance of publicity hidden in these letters. On the other hand, the increasing popularity of folk culture and beliefs in 19th century literature had the most intensive social practice in that period, as well as the manifestations and consequences of discourse over connecting women and certain beliefs. Witch-hunts, which affected even the highest social classes, are portrayed much more intensively in the early modern period than in earlier times.

In my dissertation's *introduction*, I use several popular literary examples (*Lenke Bajza: Leányok tükre*) to show the contemporary women's ideal, how were they applied to modern women, and how the careers of historical female figures were used as examples or counterexamples of an etiquette book for young girls, and how they reflected on historical elements where the heroic deeds of these women were not compatible with the contemporary ideal. Through the legends and anecdotes related to these women, I plan to show what kind of processes were characteristic of alternative history writing in the 19th century.

In the *first chapter* of my dissertation, I focus on the culture of motherhood, examining early modern and 19th century sources regarding the maternal role as the role of the mediator. On the one hand, I will present the anomaly which has been present during both time periods: that while women were "banished" to the solitude of private life and their tasks were limited to their family, the raising of their children granted them public responsibility as well. Moreover, the dissertation aims to show how maternity allows access to the active participation in political life for women. This chapter will examine the lack of motherhood and the question of sterility: partly, it will show how was this portrayed in folklore, and how can one become a mediator of the supernatural world because of sterility, as well as how can sterility be used as a tool against women in politics, as it was seen as the symbol of unfamiliarity and irritation. Apart from the lack of maternity and the culture of motherhood, the chapter will also discuss the taboo of the

bad mother, as the evil stepmother character in tales and literature. I will also investigate motherhood as the obstacle of women's engagement in the public sphere: according to the contemporary approach, women were incapable of taking on political roles because they were unable to prioritize public over private interest - in other words, they were unable to prioritize the nation's interest over their children. Instead of the examples that support this stereotype, I rather focus on the exceptions.

In the second chapter, I investigate the belief system of the mediator from an anthropological point of view (Éva Pócs). The central figure of this belief is the witch, but the fairy, the mermaid and the vampire also appears in these beliefs. I will show the appearance of sexual breaks from norms and aberrations as the consequences of love spells, sicknesses and political murders as the outcomes of curses and hexes, and how were these used in the discourses of politically tense situations. I will also investigate what kind of other approaches and explanations appear in the beginning and the second half of the 20th century, and how did they coexist with the usage of folklore elements regarding Erzsébet Báthory (beast, witch, vampire), the criminological approach (serial killer), and the changes in medical science (hysteria, sadism).

3. The third chapter will close the dissertation and will examine the 19th century renaissance, the earlier approach towards renaissance, as well as the reputation of one ethnicity, the Italians. I will investigate these female figures in the view of the characteristically Italian intellectual and material culture, mentality and etiquette, since these women can be completely identified as the *donna di palazzo* figures of renaissance Italian courts. (It is the female version of Baldassare Castiglione's *man of the court*, which is also discussed in his work regarding the ideal of women.). In this chapter, I examine how the unfamiliarity and irritation towards these women contributed to the ideal of women, which was completely different from the Hungarian.

Results of the dissertation

(1) By examining the different texts of this period (from press to scientific works and literature), it can be seen that through the ideal of the patriotic woman, a new, alternative women's ideal is born, which shows women in active roles in the public sphere, despite being only temporarily applicable during crises or extreme historical events. While the traditional women's ideal is propagated through these women, it is clear that even through these traditional roles (which were considered passive), one can also become an active political figure.

(2) A duality can be discovered in the anecdotes and legends that were found in the historical sources: while there was serious criticism in literature, and many people saw the propagandistic aspect of these sources, legends were also characteristic in these sources. The examined corpus also shows that opposing processes ran in parallel: unveiling of misbeliefs along with creating legends and the over exaggeration of historical female figures in folklore. In the reconstruction of the story of a given woman, there are both sacralizing, demonizing, rehabilitating, mythicizing and demythicizing intentions present.

(3) Beliefs have an important role in portraying historical women in 18th century literature. Portraying a belief and the appearance of a belief on different levels of the language might represent an actual folklore reference or a psychic state, and it can also function as a linguistic sign. In this case, the folklore interpretation does not rule out the approach of psychology history or literary theory either.

(4) The 19th century women's ideal had been reintroduced into the early modern period by contemporary writers in order to encourage the female society to follow these examples. The characteristics in these stories can be substituted and can be always associated with unique traits. There was a constant dilemma in the cause of the counterexamples: should they be part of the discourse as a deterrent, or should that person be removed from the "nation's history".

(5) In their own time period, women who lived differently from society's norms were judged based on the given power relations. Even though women got into these kinds of situations because of their gender, their conflicts should be viewed not only as a conflict between men and women, but also as a conflict between private and public interests, and as a conflict between other interest groups. These two contradicting interpretations can be unified in a literary representation.

(6) In many occasions, literary texts react more sensitively to the manipulative and artificial characteristics of historical sources than the contemporary figures of historical research. Due to the variability and the ability to show multiple perspectives in parallel, a literary writer can present a historical female figure in a more complex way. However, by doing so, they also show these figures' inaccessibility due to this variability.

(7) The various approaches and traditions regarding these women were not replaced by each other, but they have coexisted instead. The old beliefs existed along with the ever changing and evolving image. This research is a good example to show that when we examine paradigm

shifts, turning points or episteme changes, we should not think of sharp turns, but rather of overlapping boundaries and parallel coexistence.

(8) The irritation and unfamiliarity can be partially explained by the female figures of the mediator belief system and the *donna di palazzo* concept of Italian renaissance that differs greatly from the Hungarian women's ideal. However, the examined women can only be partly incorporated into these beliefs.

Literary texts examined in the dissertation

Publications issued in the topic of the dissertation